

Relationship Realities:

A summary of findings from a
survey on the effects of drug and
alcohol misuse on relationships



Introduction

This document presents findings from a survey completed by 100 individuals affected by drug and alcohol use problems and a brief review of evidence examining the link between substance misuse and relationships.

It was produced by relationship research charity OnePlusOne and alcohol, drugs and families charity, Adfam. It supports the launch of Relationship Realities, an audio resource that aims to strengthen the relationships of couples affected by drug and alcohol misuse.

To listen to the audio and find out more about the work of the charities, please visit:

www.oneplusone.org.uk/addiction

www.adfam.org.uk

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Methodology

- Brief review of existing reports/journals on the effects of drug/alcohol misuse on relationships.
- Online survey for people whose couple relationships are, or have been, affected by drug/alcohol misuse.
- Phone interviews with people whose couple relationships are, or have been, affected by drug/alcohol misuse.

The respondents were largely known to Adfam and its networks – One hundred people took part in an online survey with six interviewed over the phone.

The online survey was shared via multiple channels – Adfam shared the online survey through its social media channels, e-newsletters and other sector organisations.

The findings were compiled in August and September 2016.

A range of people shared their experiences, however there were a number of similarities in the sample:

81%

The majority of respondents were female

80%

The majority of respondents were aged between 35 and 64

44%

More than two fifths of people who responded to the survey have/had a spouse/partner affected by drug or alcohol misuse

59%

More than half of respondents said their loved one was either still using or occasionally using

39%

For 2 in 5 people who responded to the survey, their loved one was still using

Relationship strain

Whether drug or alcohol misuse is within a couple's relationship, or it's another loved one with the problem, it is often putting a huge strain on couple relationships.

95% of respondents said their couple relationship was affected by either their partner or a loved one's drug or alcohol misuse

71% said their relationship was affected to a large extent



“It revealed a lot of cracks in our relationship and irreconcilable differences in [our] approach to problems.”

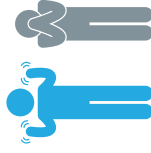
Female, 55-64, child affected by drug/alcohol misuse

1 in 3 are not together anymore



50% said it caused arguments between them and their family members

77% reported arguing with their partner



“It isolates us and our children from friends and family.”

Male, 55-64, wife affected by drug/alcohol misuse

34%

spent less time with each other

26% of couples stopped talking to each other



“[It] caused stress between us and family members.”

Female, 65-74, child and husband affected by drug/alcohol misuse

54% said it had a negative effect on the intimacy in their relationship



“We spent/still spend all our time talking about it and not developing our relationship. Our relationship has been a little neglected.”

Female, 26-34, sibling affected by drug/alcohol misuse

Relationship strain

“ I spend quite a lot of time with someone else and suspect he does too.”

Female, 55-64, child affected by drug/alcohol misuse

“ Our relationship has [been] profoundly affected. It is always ‘there’ between us, affecting our communication.”

Female, 55-64, child affected by drug/alcohol misuse

Susie, 35

Susie and her husband divorced as a result of her husband's drug addiction. She describes her ex-husband as a “functioning drug addict” who ran a business and was keeping his life together in many other ways. However, she adds, “he was focused on drugs and I wasn't his priority”.

Peter, 56

Peter's son was using drugs in his early twenties and this put a great strain on Peter's marriage, causing many arguments. Their arguments focused on the whereabouts of their son and concern over his activity and actions. They nearly parted a few times.

Laraine, 71

Laraine's son started using drugs when he was 19, which led to his death ten years later. Laraine and her husband divorced when their son was 23 years old. Although Laraine and her husband worked together for their son, she believes her son's drug misuse was one of the reasons her marriage broke down as it put a significant pressure on her and her family.

Seeking support

Many of the people surveyed sought informal or formal support to help them deal with the way in which their relationship was affected by drug or alcohol misuse.

46% talked to friends

39% attended drug/alcohol support groups

34% talked to their partner

33% went to counselling alone

12% went to counselling together with their partner

12% joined online forums for people affected by drug/alcohol misuse

In addition:

18% said they sought support from a community group

18% said they sought support via a treatment service

10% sought support from a couples/relationship service

“ [I/We sought] support from friends and people who have been in a similar situation.”

Female, 18-25, partner uses drugs

“ I sought support from private counselling and online forums”

Female, 35-44, partner uses drugs/alcohol

Peter, 56

Peter attends a support group on his own; he says talking through things has helped him: “I’ve toughened up over the last few months.” He said there is no weakness between him and his wife: “we’re a team now we’re both on the same page.”

However

39% didn't seek any support at all and others felt there was none available

“I don't feel there is any support for me as I live in a very small community.”

Female, 45-54, husband affected by drug misuse

“I didn't know where to go for support and wasn't offered any by the treatment service.”

Female, 35-44, husband affected by drug/alcohol misuse

“[No support was] offered despite requests.”

Male, 45-54, mum and brother affected by drug/alcohol misuse

“No support for myself was available. I now run a carers support service.”

Female, 45-54, husband affected by alcohol misuse

And practitioners need to realise...

“Don't expect family members to be a “protective factor” as they are victims and vulnerable too.”

Male, 45-54, parent affected by drug/alcohol misuse

“Try to understand there might be a lot of frustration and the relationship can be shaky.”

Female, 18-25, partner affected by drug misuse

“The whole family need to be included in the circle, especially if the person misusing is still living at home or with a partner. Just treating and supporting the user won't necessarily guarantee a successful outcome. The rest of the family need the tools themselves too.”

Female, 55-64, child affected by drug/alcohol misuse

Looking forward

Research suggests that couples who are able to adopt a “we” perspective, and react to stressful events as a unit, demonstrate an increased capacity to cope.

Time and seeking external support can play an important role in helping couples affected by drugs and alcohol misuse stay stronger together.

Thinking about the status of their relationship now, the majority of respondents reported some encouraging signs:



27% said they are stronger



16% said they talk to each other more



16% said they spend more time together

David, 57

David and his partner separated over his son's addiction, as they didn't agree on how to deal with it. During their time apart David received help and was able to discuss his experiences with people who had been through similar issues. As a result he was able to get back together with his partner. They're now happily married. David said: “we learnt to be unified and know that how we were treating my son was the right approach.”

If you do only one thing: Tips from couples affected by drug or alcohol misuse

“Talk about it; it’s not your fault; people make their own choices; people need to take responsibility for their actions; a marriage is greater and stronger than an individual’s poor life choices.”

Male, 45-54, child affected by drug misuse

“Persist; it won’t last forever and if your relationship is worth it, it will survive. Talk about your feelings to each other always.”

Female, 26-34, sibling affected by drug and alcohol misuse

“Don’t let the situation take over everything.”

Female, 65-74, child affected by drug/alcohol misuse

“Keep talking. Take a step back from the situation. You cannot cure it.”

Female, 55-64, child affected by alcohol misuse

“Listen to each other. Be honest with each other. Don’t judge each other. Accept differences in viewpoints and try to work those differences through. Get external help where it’s available.”

Female, 65-74, child affected by drug misuse

“Talk and listen each other. You will know in your own mind when things feel right and when things feel wrong regarding a family member’s drug or alcohol misuse.”

Male, 45-54, child affected by drug misuse

“Don’t have any secrets from each other.”

Female, 65-74, child affected by drug misuse

“Seek help immediately. Don’t go it alone.”

Female, 45-54, husband affected by drug misuse

“Talk is the way forward.”

Female, 65-74, child affected by drug misuse

“Look after each other as a priority. Others need to make their own mistakes and their consequences don’t need to be yours.”

Male, 45-54, parent affected by drug/alcohol misuse

“Don’t neglect each other. Also try not to be too judgemental.”

Female, 26-34, parent affected by drug/alcohol misuse

“Seek help immediately. Don’t consider that you can necessarily sort this on your own. Keep talking. However, sometimes it is better to leave and understand that change will only happen when you both understand the problem and want things to alter.”

Female, 45-54, partner affected by alcohol misuse

Further information
www.oneplusone.org.uk/addiction
www.adfam.org.uk

